

Dean Acheson, 1893-1971

In the early '50s, Sen. Joseph McCarthy called Secretary of State Dean Acheson a "coddler" of Communists and the man who had "lost" China; by the middle 1960s, when the world was changing and American perceptions of it were changing retroactively, a provocative bloc of young historians began to conclude that Acheson had really been the "Commissar of the cold war" and an anti-Communist beyond all reason or wisdom. Either way, no one ever made the mistake of underestimating Acheson's impact on the postwar world. By the time he died last week at 78 of a heart attack at his Maryland farm, Acheson had been out of office for eighteen years, but he still stood alone with his patron and champion, Harry S. Truman, as the senior architect of American postwar foreign policy and the source of most of the assumptions about global diplomacy that have governed U.S. foreign policy right down to the present day.

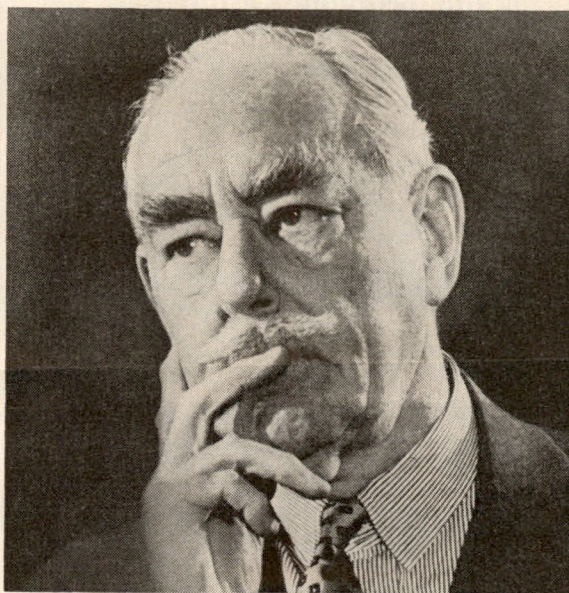
Acheson held the office of Secretary of State for only three and a half years, from 1949 to early 1953, but he had served previously as Acting Secretary, and almost all the great American global thrusts of the time were his responsibility to some major degree—the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall plan, NATO, U.S. intervention in Korea, West German separatism and rearmament, the isolation of Communist China and the defense of Chiang Kai-shek. He advanced a pre-Dulles version of the domino theory before it had a name, and he believed utterly in the implacability of Soviet imperialism and the futility of negotiating with the Russians. If the Korean War was just and necessary, then so too was Vietnam. "Nobody will tell me how this war is going to come out," Lyndon Johnson said during one of Acheson's visits to the White House as a wise old party. "Why don't you tell me?"

Reply: "Mr. President," Acheson said, "if your predecessor President Washington had asked that question at Valley Forge, his advisers would have answered the same thing as I. This thing can only come out two ways, and one of them is too awful to contemplate."

Wit was as much a part of the Acheson persona as self-assurance—and the two of them together were formidable. Son of the Episcopal Bishop of Connecticut, Acheson cruised effortlessly through Groton School and Yale University, then came awake to the pleasures and uses of the mind at Harvard Law School. One of his professors was Felix Frankfurter, with whom he formed a lifetime friendship, and Frankfurter sent him to Washington

to clerk for Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis and to forage for wisdom at the feet of Oliver Wendell Holmes. "Man was created to form general principles," Holmes told the future diplomat, "and none of them was worth a damn." Acheson was as impressed as if he had said it himself.

Martini: Tall, sartorially elegant, already boasting the haughty mustache that preceded him like a trumpet flourish, Acheson rose with a certain inevitability to become a senior partner in a prestigious Washington law firm in his early 30s. Then as later, he seemed to regard his work as a game at which he was cleverer than the rest; when a client fawned over him for a legal brief that



Formidable wit, Brahmin self-assurance

was a "masterpiece" of clarity, logic and persuasiveness, Acheson sipped at a Martini and said: "It almost convinced me."

In the late 1930s, Acheson became active in trying to rouse the nation to the perils of Hitlerism, pleading that the U.S. must aid and ally itself with the free nations of Europe. In 1941 he entered the State Department as an Assistant Secretary and by the end of the war he held a reputation as State's most knowledgeable administrator, a matchless problem-solver and Washington's "No. 1 No. 2 man." At State, Acheson excelled at cajoling unprecedented global authorizations and appropriations from a largely isolationist Congress, sipping bourbon and branch with the boys in the Senate back room and hailing Sen. Arthur Vandenberg—a Midwestern Republican vanity case who could be persuaded to vote Democratic on foreign affairs—as the second greatest senator in history, after Henry Clay. Those who voted otherwise were "nin-nies," "jackasses" and "fools."

The key to Acheson's power was his extraordinary relationship with Harry

Truman. Unlike at least one of his immediate predecessors, James F. Byrnes, who ran State like a personal fiefdom, the sardonic Brahmin took great pains and pleasure to defer to the rough-and-tumble politician from Missouri, calling him "the greatest little man" he knew and the "captain" whom Acheson served as a "faithful first lieutenant." It was not insignificant that when Truman returned to Washington after the disastrous Democratic defeats in the Congressional election of 1946, the only Administration figure to meet him at Union Station was his Under Secretary of State. Truman in turn came to regard Acheson as a foreign-affairs chief ranking with Thomas Jefferson and William Henry Seward. Acheson's loyalties extended downward as well as upward. In a famous statement, he said he "did not intend to turn my back" on his friend and colleague Alger Hiss, an accused Communist agent under investigation by a Congressional committee led by Rep. Richard Nixon. Acheson also tried to shield State's China hands from attack.

Disdain: Acheson's powers, persuasions and passions were reserved for his dealings with the Russians. Convinced that Stalinist ambitions were worldwide and implacable, and fresh from Hitler's demonstration of the fruits of "appeasement," Acheson and Truman ringed the Iron Curtain with economic and military alliances. The bishop's son disdained peace talks with the Soviets; they were humorless, untrustworthy and not diplomatically "housebroken," he said. As early as 1947, testifying before Congress on the necessity of intervening against Communist-led guerrillas in Greece, Acheson warned that the overthrow of the Greek royal house would spread an unstoppable "Communist infection" to Asia, Africa and Western Europe. At best this was hyperbole—Stalin turned out to have no hand in the Greek uprising—but Acheson wanted to sound a "reveille" against the Russian menace for the war-fatigued American public. The bugle blast worked for a while as Acheson had hoped, but it also woke up the Republican right. By the last two years of the Truman Administration, Acheson was being pilloried for having failed to "save" Chiang's China from Mao and for being "soft on Communism." McCarthy, Acheson replied, was "a scoundrel."

Acheson pursued his perception of the Soviet-American conflict long after his return to private law practice. A frequent and respected adviser at the White House, he urged the bombing of Cuban missile sites on John F. Kennedy ("he was not decisive," said Acheson after he was rebuffed) and supported the Vietnam war down to the end. The shadows of Achesonian policy extended even to Mr. Nixon's White House. And how did the Secretary finally come to feel about Mr. Nixon? Acheson sipped at his Martini, tugged at his mustache and said, "Motherly."

—RICHARD BOETH